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# A Newer World Order

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Lee Sustar looks at the political impact of Russia's invasion of Georgia.

Russian soldiers look on as Georgia burns

THE RUSSIA-Georgia war has revealed a new balance of power in the world--and exposed the hypocrisy of U.S. politicians and the media who decry the imperialism emanating from Moscow, but embrace it when it's made in the USA.

John McCain, of course, wins the prize for setting the most outrageous double standard. "In the 21st century," he informed us, "nations don't invade other nations." Unless, of course, we're talking about Afghanistan or Iraq, and the invading power happens to be the United States. McCain demanded an immediate pullout of all Russian forces from Georgia and insisted upon its "territorial integrity"--even as he claims the right for the U.S. to occupy Iraq for the next 100 years.

The supposedly progressive Barack Obama sounded little different. "I have condemned Russian aggression, and today I reiterate my demand that Russia abide by the cease-fire," he said. "Russia must know that its actions will have consequences."

One can imagine how a President Obama would respond if Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin or President Dimitri Medvedev declared that he wouldn't withdraw all troops from Georgia right away, but would leave behind a large occupation force in order to be "as careful in getting out of Georgia as we were careless in getting in." That, of course, is Obama's excuse for keeping up to 50,000 U.S. troops in Iraq for "force protection," the defense of U.S. military personnel and "anti-terrorist" missions--the same kind of pretext that Russia used to move beyond Georgia's disputed South Ossetia region to a full-fledged invasion.

The media has been even more two-faced than the politicians. The same news outlets that parroted the Pentagon whitewash of civilian casualties in the horrific U.S. blitz on Falluja in Iraq in 2004 or aerial bombardment of wedding parties in Afghanistan now breathlessly report on the Russian bombs and artillery shells that hit apartment buildings and markets.

For the U.S. media, when Washington military action causes civilian deaths--between 600,000 and more than 1 million in Iraq, according to some estimates--it's "collateral damage," a regrettable but unavoidable part of modern warfare. Yet when a Russian plane drops a bomb that kills innocent bystanders, it's a barbaric disregard for human life. One wonders just how much more unpopular the U.S. war in Iraq would be if the media worked as hard at exposing civilian casualties in that country as it has in Georgia.

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TO POINT out this U.S. hypocrisy isn't to downplay the imperial nature of Russia's latest occupation of Georgia. Georgia may have initiated the conflict by trying to smash the Russian-backed separatists among the Ossetian minority--and likely did so with a green light from the U.S. But Russia seized the opportunity to make an example of Georgia through military might--and not for the first time.

The Tsarist rulers of old Russia conquered Georgia more than two centuries ago. After a brief interlude following the Russian Revolution of 1917, Georgia was again imprisoned in Stalin's USSR. The Georgian nationalist movement revived in the 1980s despite murderous repression by the supposedly liberal Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the USSR.

The 1991 collapse of the USSR saw the non-Russian "federal republics," including Georgia, gain independence. With Russian imperialism in crisis, US imperialism was determined to fill the vacuum, not only in Moscow's former puppet states in Eastern Europe, but in countries formerly part of the USSR.

Georgia, however, was slow going for the US. The pro-Western Georgian nationalist leader, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, pushed a "Georgia for the Georgians" line that frightened the 30 percent of the population that was non-Georgian--people whom Gamsakhurdia ominously referred to as "guests." The first non-Communist Party head of Georgia in the waning days of the USSR, Gamsakhurdia went on to revoke the autonomous status of Abkhazia and North Ossetia, which had been enshrined in the USSR's constitution. Resistance from the Abkhazians and Ossetians led to civil war and ethnic cleansing and, with Russian intervention, de facto independence for both regions since 1993.

The situation was little changed under the regime of Eduard Shevardnadze, the former foreign minister of the USSR who returned home to Georgia to take over the presidency after Gamsakhurdia was ousted in a coup. During Shevardnadze's decade in power, Russia and the U.S. jockeyed for influence in Georgia.

Washington found a willing business partner in Shevardnadze. He was in favor of an oil pipeline that would bypass Russia. He was also a career Soviet politician who had run Georgia in the 1970s and who refused to take a consistent anti-Moscow line. In 2003, an election year in Georgia, Shevardnadze set off alarm bells in Washington by making a deal with the Russian electrical power monopoly AES, which followed an earlier "strategic partnership" with the huge Russian gas company Gazprom.

In late 2003, the U.S., then still in the confident "Mission Accomplished" phase of the Iraq war, decided to up the ante. It backed the U.S.-educated lawyer Mikheil Saakashvili, the leader of the mass protests of the "Rose Revolution" that ousted Shevardnadze after his party tried to rig parliamentary election results. Modeled on the rebellion that drove Slobodan Milosevic from power in Serbia in 2000, the Rose Revolution was sustained in part by money from the foundation controlled by billionaire financier George Soros. In the wake of the Rose Revolution the Soros foundation and other donors, as well as the United Nations Development Project, even paid salaries for 11,000 civil servants as part of a three-year aid program.

The U.S. saw the Saakashvili government as a means to accelerate its energy and defense plans for Georgia. Saakashvili's presidential inauguration in 2004 was attended by then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, who announced \$166 million in immediate aid as well as a three-year, \$500 million aid package to promote "economic reforms." This was only part of a steady stream of U.S. dollars to a country of just 4.6 million people. According to one study, Georgia is the second highest recipient of U.S. aid per capita in the world. Meanwhile, the European Union and the World Bank pledged another \$1 billion in assistance to Saakashvili's government.

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SOON, THE White House was ready to plant the U.S. flag in the heart of the South Caucasus. George W. Bush visited Tbilisi in May 2005 to "underscore his support for democracy, historic reform and peaceful conflict resolution," as the U.S. Embassy in Georgia put it in a press release. These "reforms,"

according to Kakha Bendukidze, the Russia-based industrial oligarch turned Georgian economy minister, meant that the Georgian state would privatize "everything that can be sold, except its conscience."

With Saakashvili in power, Washington moved aggressively to create in Georgia a crucial gateway for oil and gas pipelines that could bypass Russia on the north and Iran on the south. It was under Saakashvili that the long-sought Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline was finally completed in 2005, providing a means to get oil from Azerbaijan on the Caspian Sea across Georgia to a Turkish port on the Mediterranean.

The U.S. had to strong-arm Western oil companies into building BTC-- ultimately, BP agreed to take the lead. The U.S. also had to pressure the International Finance Corporation, the private development arm of the World Bank, to loan \$250 million for construction of the pipeline.

"In the South Caucasus, U.S. and European state interests are bound up with the commercial interests of major oil companies that form the principal Caspian energy consortia," wrote Damien Helly and Giorgi Gogia, two experts on Georgian politics. "To secure their investments in the Caspian Sea Basin, these companies have found allies among U.S. geostrategists who support a strong U.S. presence among Russia's neighbors. High-level former officials such as Zbigniew Brzezinski, Brent Scowcroft, John Sununu, James Baker and Richard Cheney (when he was head of Halliburton) have all visited Baku [Azerbaijan] and the Caspian region and lobbied in favor of the oil companies."

These U.S. economic and political projects had to be secured militarily. Thus, in the wake of 9/11, the U.S. began to send military advisers to Georgia. That move rankled Moscow, which also accused Georgia of doing too little to stop the flow of arms and insurgents across its border into neighboring Chechnya, where separatists were fighting the Russian armed forces.

For Russia, Georgia was seen as a red line that the U.S. and NATO could not cross. In the early 1990s, Russia had no choice but to allow the expansion of NATO to include its former satellites in Eastern Europe and the three former Soviet Republics on the Baltic. But the U.S. push to include Georgia and Ukraine in the alliance--as well as efforts to place anti-missile systems in the Czech Republic and Poland--was too much for the Kremlin.

After Saakashvili took over in Tbilisi, U.S.-Russian tensions over Georgia increased dramatically. In 2004, NATO approved Georgia's "Individual Action Partnership Plan," the first step toward membership of the alliance, and stationed a liaison officer in Tbilisi. In the years since, the U.S. and Israel have sent military trainers to upgrade Georgia's military to NATO standards, and Saakashvili has showed his loyalty to the U.S. by sending 2,500 Georgian troops to participate in the occupation of Iraq. By 2007, the Georgian armed forces, previously a ragtag outfit unable to defeat irregular militias in South Ossetia or Abkhazia, was well-drilled, lavishly equipped and NATO-ready. The U.S. pushed for a fast-track acceptance into the alliance.

All that state-of-the-art weaponry, of course, is now smashed or captured by the Russian army, and the armed forces shattered by the Russian occupation. What began as the latest U.S. attempt to use a small nation as an outpost of the American Empire has ended with a brutal invasion by a rival empire, one just as determined to police its own "backyard" as the U.S. has been in Latin America. And in the wake of the Russia-Georgia war, oil-rich Azerbaijan-- which has its own separatist region populated by ethnic Armenians allied with Russia--will think twice about crossing Moscow to sign up with the US and NATO.

But the consequences of the Russian invasion go far beyond the South Caucasus region. The war has exposed the expanded NATO as a hollow organization. "For an organization that has come to rely heavily on words and symbolism, NATO issued a disconcertingly evasive communique at its emergency meeting on Georgia," journalist Vladimir Socor wrote. "The first mention of Russia appears only in the second paragraph, and it is a positive mention: NATO 'welcomes the [armistice] agreement reached and signed by Georgia and Russia.' No reference to the Russian military duress, under which this flawed armistice was 'reached.' The communique urges prompt, good-faith implementation of the armistice, politely ignoring its loopholes."

So much for NATO's vaunted "one-for-all, all-for-one" principle. The U.S. and NATO have bankrolled and armed a tiny nation, encouraged or tolerated a military attack that was bound to trigger a response from a neighboring great power--and, when that small country was invaded and occupied, the U.S. stood back and did nothing.

So much for the neoconservative dream of a "new world order" under U.S. domination, guaranteed by pre-emptive warfare and regime change. The U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were intended to allow Washington to consolidate its grip on the Middle East and project its power into the Caucasus and Central Asia. Instead, the U.S. finds itself militarily overstretched, incapable of protecting its new client states and unable even to get a strong resolution out of NATO condemning Russia's invasion of Georgia--to say nothing of NATO countries' reluctance to commit troops to the losing war in Afghanistan.

There are other examples of waning U.S. imperial clout--the ouster of Pervez Musharraf as dictator of Pakistan being the latest serious example. The cracks in the empire, in turn, are widened by the ongoing U.S. financial crisis which is increasingly dragging down the entire world economy. The entire U.S. economic model--the pro-business, free-trade neoliberal program--is being discredited. The recent collapse of the latest World Trade Organization negotiations is a case in point.

U.S. imperialism is far from a spent force, of course. The country still has enormous military might and economic resources, and a President Obama would likely bring in a foreign policy and military team that's more competent than the Bush administration hacks. But no matter who's in charge in the White House, the shift in the world balance of power--economically, militarily and politically--is bound to lead to further instability and crises.

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